

## **Q&A: Nathalie Du Pasquier, the Queen of Memphis**

Du Pasquier reflects on her beginnings, contemplates Memphis's enduring legacy, and touches on the blurring of art and design.

by Metropolis Editors (<https://www.metropolismag.com/author/metropoliseditors/>).



Artist-designer Nathalie Du Pasquier stands in front of Chamber gallery, where in late February she opened her latest solo show and launched her new book, *Don't Take These Drawings Seriously. 1981-1987* (<http://www.amazon.com/Dont-Take-These-Drawings-Seriously/dp/157687754X>) (powerHouse Books).

Courtesy Chamber

When the Memphis Group dissolved in 1987, its former members and contributors continued to work at all levels of architecture and design. But with the collapse of “The New International Style,” the erstwhile collective’s youngest member, [Nathalie Du Pasquier](http://www.nathaliedupasquier.com/home1.html) (<http://www.nathaliedupasquier.com/home1.html>), quietly made her exit from the design world. She

has spent the intervening decades prodigiously turning out paintings and sculptures in her Milan studio. It took the economic crisis and the fallout of the art market for Du Pasquier to turn her talents back to design. Her gift for pattern-making and color combinations has never been more in demand, including recent collaborations with European manufacturer Wrong for Hay and clothes maker American Apparel ([http://store.americanapparel.net/nathalie-du-pasquier\\_cat1520013](http://store.americanapparel.net/nathalie-du-pasquier_cat1520013)). This recent work harkens back to the productivity of the Memphis period, documented in a new book of drawings Du Pasquier designed and compiled with *Apartmento* (<http://www.apartmentomagazine.com/>) cofounder Omar Sosa. During opening week of her new solo art exhibition ([http://chambernyc.com/collections/test\\_collection/bulletin](http://chambernyc.com/collections/test_collection/bulletin)) at New York's Chamber gallery, (<http://www.metropolismag.com/Cabinet-of-Curiosities/>), *Metropolis* editors Samuel Medina and Paul Makovsky met with Du Pasquier to talk about her beginnings, Memphis's enduring legacy, and the blurring of art and design.

**Paul Makovsky: When you were younger, you spent time traveling through French-speaking Africa. Why travel there and not through Europe or even Asia? Why not China, for instance?**

Nathalie Du Pasquier: At the time, China was Mao country and not very easy to enter, especially if you were coming from France. When I was young, America even seemed too far to travel to. Africa, on the other hand, is very close to France and shares a history with it. You just go across the Mediterranean and you are on a different continent.

I didn't choose to go to Africa so much as I had the occasion to arrive there. I stayed for a few months in Gabon and traveled in West Africa. Altogether, I stayed almost a year.

**PM: Was there a connection with some of the early patterns you developed for Memphis and what you saw in Africa?**

NDP: It's difficult for me to say because at that age, everything you see leaves an impression. I don't think my patterns for Memphis were particularly African, but they had names of African countries! In any case, it was in Africa where I noticed for the first time the power of pattern. The way people wore patterns there, and the way things look, the music, the different landscapes—all that left a strong impression.



Du Pasquier's patterns captured the spirit of Memphis's youthful energy, which sought to reinvigorate visual culture on an international scale, replacing tired Modernist tropes wholesale. For Memphis, she applied these patterns to textiles and furniture, often in concert with George Sowden, whom she later married. She also began producing designs for fashion house Fiorucci (pictured).

**Samuel Medina: Early in your career, you seemed drawn to patterns and textiles more than objects. What was the reason for that attraction?**

NDP: You know, I didn't study after high school. There was just the school of life. Designing surfaces doesn't require a university diploma. You don't need to know about physics, you just have to organize shapes on a flat plane. It is a really old human activity.

**SM: You didn't become interested in how those patterns were translated into textiles?**

NDP: I was never involved in the making of the actual textiles. I didn't think about their production, as they were mostly printed. I would do the pattern, and the manufacturer would do what they wanted with it. Sometimes they would weave it. Sometimes they would print it—either on textile or on paper to make a plastic laminate.

**SM: So making textiles was a personal activity for you? It wasn't a world that you were entrenched in?**

NDP: Yes, it was very personal. But I think it might be better to say that I designed patterns and not textiles. And their application was mainly on textiles. When I moved to Milan and met George [Sowden, Du Pasquier's husband and fellow Memphis alumnus] he encouraged me to use my drawings to design textiles. I was becoming interested in design and looked around at the modern city where I was living. But you know, a lot of people think I have been very influenced by Africa, which I was, of course. The African textiles I saw in my travels certainly remained in my brain.

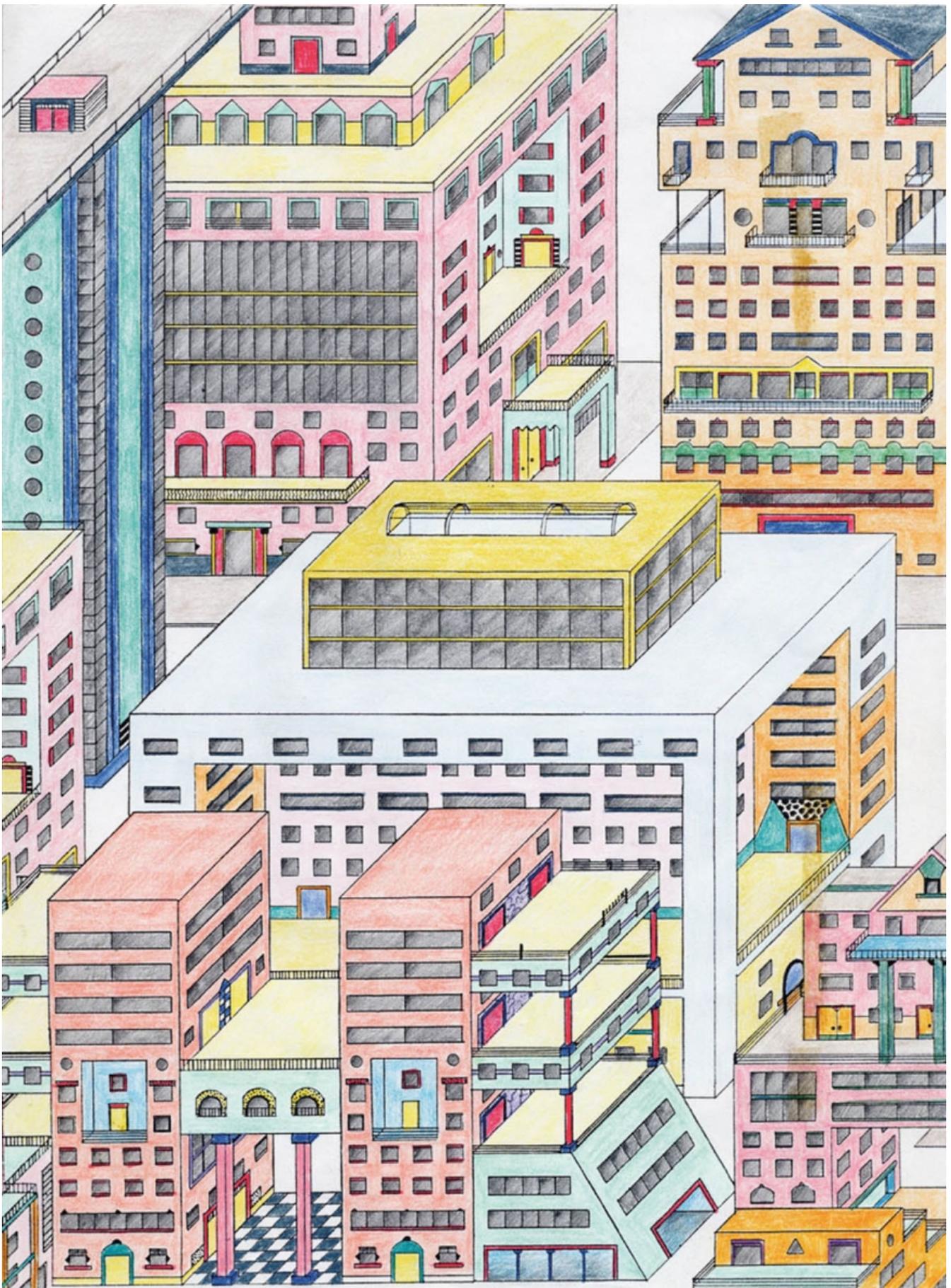
But there were all the other things I was discovering in the world of design and architecture. I became curious about other historical movements as well, like the Wiener Werkstätte, Arts and Crafts, William Morris, and hundreds of other things. But all of that is so normal for a young person!

**PM: What about the names of your Memphis textiles—did you come up with them? In all of Memphis's work, there seems to be this preoccupation with cartography.**

NDP: The names weren't given by us, but by our friend and "art director" Barbara Radice. They were part of communicating to the world what we were doing. The first year, she gave all of Memphis's pieces the names of international hotels, such as Ettore Sottsass's famous Carlton cabinet—and to my textiles, the names of African countries. Our project was "The New International Style," so it was natural to acquire names of places around the world.

**PM: Looking at your artworks now, they are less involved with pattern and more invested in volume, space, and a saturation of color.**

NDP: Absolutely. Patterns were something I was doing in the 1980s when I was also making a living designing textiles. I must say that the whole story of patterns for me started when I began following what George had started himself. It is really the story of a mixing of influences. I applied my ideas onto George's theory—that surfaces could give structure to an object, and that by changing the surface of an object, you give it a different meaning. "Decorated surface," as we called it, became very important to us. We applied that to almost all of our projects.



Around the same time, Du Pasquier prepared several isometric drawings that depicted imaginative, highly dense urban configurations. This color-pencil capriccio is a “mise-en-place of shapes,” Du Pasquier says. The drawing was intended as a study for a vast panorama she later completed with Sowden.

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**SM:** That’s different from most architecture and design thinking, where surface patterning or decoration can seem flip-pant. It’s rarely seen as playing a structural, or consequential, role. Did that bother you, then, and does it still?

NDP: No, it doesn't. [Laughs] Personally, I think the surface is very important to design. Even in architecture where you have "neutral" surfaces, they become decor in themselves. These surfaces communicate what a building or an object has to communicate. Of course, that's a kind of austere, Protestant thing, to use harsh surfaces like in Brutalist buildings. But I have a taste for different surfaces and colors. I enjoy complexity, but all of that has to be applied correctly to what a building is supposed to communicate.

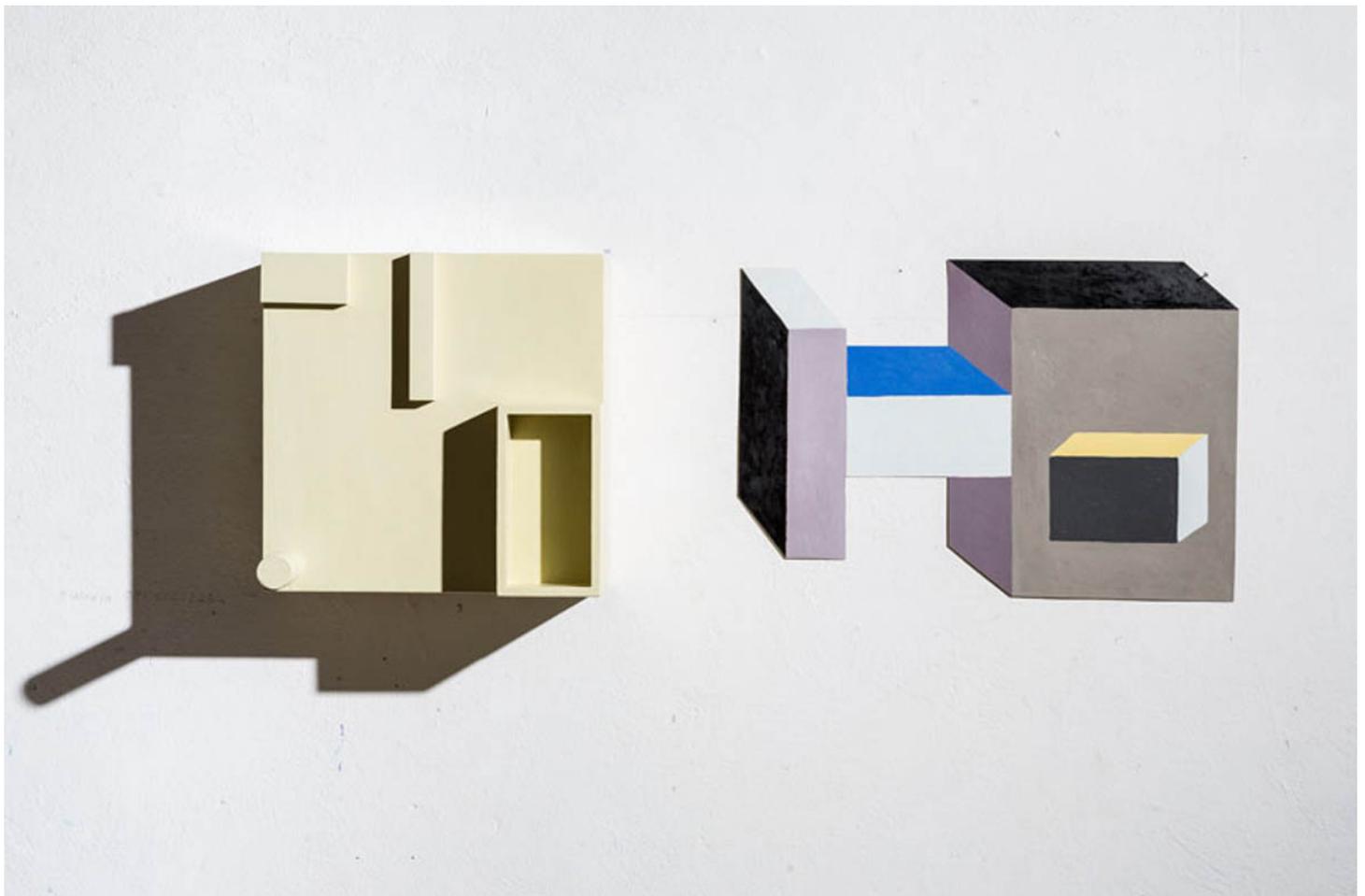
**PM: During the Memphis period, you worked for a few companies on your own designing products.**

NDP: Yes, very few. I did some shoeboxes for Camper, and I did textiles for Fiorucci and Esprit. Around that time, George and I also did a small collection of "Objects for the Electronic Age"—a collection of products in folded metal sheets and plastic laminates that were made by ARC 74. We went to Abet Print [now Abet Laminati] and got them to do special laminates (<http://www.metropolismag.com/March-2011/Surface-Appeal/>). They were very nice, because they understood the Memphis idea of the decorated surface. And they were very open to helping us.

We also did a collection of clocks and watches for an Italian company called Lorenz. We designed industrial carpets and handmade ones. And then I was selling patterns to different Italian textile printers, mostly for fashion.

**PM: And what about the work now, the art that you're doing?**

NDP: [Laughs] It has nothing to do with contemporary currents of design or architecture! It is something else. I have been painting still lifes for about 25 years, and yet these recent works—these "constructions" I've just done for this exhibition—are new for me. They are not still lifes, they don't depict a group of things, but instead portray a relationship between forms. The works are intentionally presented as a couple—next to each other you have a painted "false" or flat object and a "real" constructed, three-dimensional object. All of my work is about combinations between existing things. It does not have to do with decorating an object anymore.



Du Pasquier's solo exhibition, *It Is Hard to Get Excited About Growth of Less Than 3% With No Sign of Imminent Improvement*, ([http://chambernyc.com/collections/test\\_collection/bulletin](http://chambernyc.com/collections/test_collection/bulletin)) is currently open at Chamber in New York. The elaborate title bears little relation to the artworks, which Du Pasquier just finished in January. "The link is very thin!" she says. "It was a title designed for New York!" The show runs through May 2.

**PM: It's interesting that you're showing this work at Chamber, a gallery devoted to design. It really shows how difficult it is now to distinguish designer objects from art objects. How do you feel about it?**

NDP: For me, it is a very American context. It's this context of merchandise, of expensive things brought together, piled up, and put on display. At first, I was a bit surprised when I arrived because I actually thought the gallery was going to be empty. But then I realized this is the perfect setting: This is New York. This is America. But in truth, art should always be presented like that, I think. If you go to Palazzo Pitti in Florence, you have walls covered with hundreds of paintings and objects. Your eyes are allowed to move over all over them until they find something springing out.

**SM: This relationship between art and design, it's something that's always been part of your career. Having returned to design, what can you see has changed in the years since?**

NDP: I did not "return" to design. Design returned to me! I have had opportunities to do some design work in the last several years, thanks to a kind of revival of the 1980s that followed the exhibition on Postmodernism held in London at the Victoria and Albert Museum [2011's *Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990*]. But even though I have enjoyed these recent collaborations, I don't really consider myself a designer anymore, as I did in the 1980s.

The world has changed a lot in 30 years. Design and art were strictly divided spheres of activity then. Designers were working for the industry; they were not doing very expensive one-off pieces for galleries and art collectors. Now, Europe no longer produces much of anything, and yet many design schools have appeared that did not exist before. That is a big change.

Memphis was also a collective—international and intergenerational—which you don't really see today. Back then, I was surrounded by practicing designers and architects who were all working as professionals in their field. That was very stimulating and another very important part of my education.

**SM: Talking about Memphis now, how would you characterize that moment?**

NDP: The end of the 1970s and the early 1980s were a time when after years of political engagement and art movements like minimalism and performance art, there was a strong need for the image again. There was a strong need for telling stories. There was also more money all of a sudden, and consumerism became fashionable again! It was the Postmodern moment! I found myself in Memphis with a personal story that was typical of those years—after having traveled in other cultures like so many of my generation, and with no particular political position, just wanting to take part in what was new.



One of a series of drawings in which Du Pasquier experiments with several surface treatments—on the floor, walls, and furniture of a living room—to enliven a domestic setting. Influenced by Pompeian wall paintings, Du Pasquier designed decorative panel inserts that had a perceptual effect on the viewer. “There is this pleasure of breaking the wall with a false view,” she says.

**SM:** How have you approached the digital in your newer work?

**NDP:** I haven't. [Laughs] It's not me, I'm still a painter. But the younger generation has shown much more interest in my career and work, thanks to the Internet. I'm much more accepted now than I ever was during the Memphis period. The work I've done for American Apparel is part of that, but I think it's more to do with them—the young—and how they have experienced this past through the digital.

**PM:** People continue to read a lot into Memphis and its role in twentieth-century design. But it seems like you guys were having a lot of fun.

**NDP:** That is what most people think about Memphis, that it was just fun. But bright colors are not childish. Those patterns were not funny. It was totally misunderstood in the sense that it was taken for a joke—that the serious thinking was part of Modernism, and because what we were doing was in reaction against that, it meant we were not serious. The press thought we just wanted to have fun. But all of this was extremely serious to us. The ideas in our work were very serious in the sense that we thought they were important, and we deeply felt them. It doesn't mean we were never laughing!D

**SM:** But then you say these drawings in the new book—made during the Memphis period—“shouldn't be taken seriously.”

**NDP:** Well, that's true. [Laughs] With this book, there is a narrative that is made up of long-lost drawings and sketches that tell the story of this period, the story of the 1980s for me. But they are just drawings, and most of them never became anything else.

**PM:** I would like to quote what you say in the book: “Memphis gave me the permission to do things I would had otherwise not have attempted.” Can you explain what you mean by that?

NDP: It means that I was not alone. Being in a group and being in the middle of older and more accomplished designers gave me courage to enter the “arena.” And when I left Memphis and started to do other things, I already existed—I didn’t have to knock down another wall. This is the power of groups. The older ones in the group get energy from the younger ones, and the younger ones get the stories and visibility of their more experienced colleagues. This is a very natural dynamic, so it is very important that generations mix. Now, I am at an age that younger people are interested in me like I was interested in older people when I was young. I like that. In those years, I was told that if I wanted to do something, I had to do it. That was very good advice!

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